

# Pedagogy, Course Descriptions, and Fish: An Analysis of Professional Writing Course Descriptions

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Analyzing course descriptions offers an alternate window into looking at the purpose and goals of professional writing courses across the country. Through the analysis of actions outlined in the course description, professor pedagogy, and nomenclature, it becomes clear that there isn't a consistent goal for Professional Writing courses, and that most remain focused on teaching "basic literacy," as they did in the early days of technical writing.

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When I declared my minor in Professional Writing as a Freshman at DePaul University, I had one goal: to become the most marketable version of myself. I think this is a goal many college students share. One of the purposes of going to college and graduating with a degree is to create future employment opportunities, so students try to maximize their value as a future employee. Professional writing courses are perhaps one of the most obvious ways to do this; as the title indicates, these courses help prepare you to be a writing professional. However, what does this name mean? What does Professional Writing entail? What should a student expect from their classes and professors? What should they take away at the end of the quarter or semester?

During the summer of 2015, Dr. Sarah Read and Dr. Michael Michaud, two Professional Writing professors, began researching the current status of professional writing courses in the United States. They focused on Multi-Major Professional Writing (MMPW) courses, or courses that are "a survey/introduction to professional writing as a mode of communication that is decontextualized from any specific

knowledge or professional domain (e.g., engineering, medicine or a specialized business profession)" (Survey). Read and Michaud focused on these courses across U.S. higher education institutions and acquired data through an extensive survey, results from which were published in their 2015 *CCC* article. Their goal was to understand how instructors taught professional writing courses, how instructors felt toward the course, and improvements said instructors saw necessary.

My own research focused on Professional Writing course descriptions that each of the survey participants submitted. My focus on course descriptions directly connected to my focus on the student. Excluding student-created genres such as professor reviews or social media posts, course descriptions are often the basis for students choosing a course. Even when a course is required, the course description offers information about the class directly from the University. This element is what separates course descriptions from other genres: course descriptions are the way that universities communicate what will be taught in a classroom to the student. Essentially, a

course description is written for the student. It informs them of what knowledge they will have, what skills they will achieve, and what elements of marketability they will gain after taking the course. The University of California-Irvine suggested that professors use course descriptions to state how the class would assist the student: “Ensure each description reflects how the reader would benefit from taking the course” (1). In summary, the course description functions as a summarized promise of what will happen in the course, a synopsis meant to both describe and sell a class to students.

While analyzing the survey, I focused on course descriptions, along with the language these descriptions used to explain the course to students, in an effort to further understand the MMPW’s place in higher institutions, how it was taught, and why teachers taught in certain ways. Ultimately, I wanted to know what course descriptions show students about the classes they take, both in terms of what will happen in the course while they’re learning and what they will take away with them after they leave the classroom.

## **Methods**

My research corpus came from Read and Michaud’s survey of Multi-Major Professional Writing professors across the country. Within their survey, they asked professors to include the course description used in the course catalog. There were 127 written course descriptions. Duplicated entries were recorded as being a repeat and then deleted. After eliminating these duplicate entries, and entries where the respondent had either not responded or indicated they didn’t have time to respond, there were 110 unique course descriptions. The course descriptions ranged in length

from two sentences to short paragraphs. Many included the actual course numbers. My research using this data included four coding passes.

### ***First Coding Pass***

The first time I looked at the data, I did an open coding pass to identify trends. The goal of this initial open coding pass was to gain familiarity with the data and to locate several themes or trends that stood out within the course descriptions. The initial patterns I noticed included,

1. Many of the course descriptions mentioned “typical” business documents: resumes, emails, reports, etc., or the “conventions” that surround business documents.
2. There was a trend of emphasizing organization and design; in this same vein, a few of the descriptions mention needing an understanding of technology to design, organize, or create business documents.
3. Great importance was placed on the idea of audience and audience awareness. Additionally, there was a focus on the rhetorical and situational context in which the student would be writing.
4. There was a direct emphasis on what this course would give the student, whether it was certain skills, certain deliverables, knowledge of certain documents, or even giving statistics about how important writing in the field can be for various professions.

### ***Second Coding Pass***

Taking these themes, I completed another coding pass by sorting the data into these four categories (including multiples categories, if more than one attribute applied). For this pass, each course description was

evaluated on whether it included any of the four main themes that I noticed in my initial interaction with the data: 1) mentions stereotypical business writing documents or business writing conventions, 2) discusses technology, 3) acknowledges the importance of audience, or 4) describes what the course does for students or what they gain from the course. Descriptions that addressed multiple themes were counted for all the categories they fit into. Any data points that did not fit into these four themes were noted as “other.”

### ***Third Coding Pass***

This coding pass focused on how the college marketed their course to their students, both by looking at how the description defined the course and what it said the student would take away from the course. I focused on the language the course description used to describe the course. The data were coded based on the words “technical,” “business,” “professional,” and “workplace.” Additionally, the data were coded with a greater focus on category 4 from the second coding pass (Describes what the course does for students or what they gain from the course). This category was split into two different classifications: course descriptions focusing on document creation and course descriptions focusing on acquiring writing-based skills/courses that did more than just focus on document creation. The basis for these two classifications came from the initial coding pass, which looked at mentions of stereotypical business writing documents or business writing conventions, technology, descriptions of what students gain from the course, or the importance of audience. Out of 114 responses, 30 didn’t fit any of the four criteria. Of the remaining 84

responses, 77 included either mentions of conventional business documents or audience analysis. Broadening the scope, all the data were coded for falling into one of the two classifications: document-focused or more than just document-focused.

### ***Analysis and Final Coding Pass***

During the third pass, I sorted the course descriptions into one of two categories (those that emphasized creating documents or those that discussed more than documents alone) based on what the course description suggested the students would learn or gain from the course. As the coding process continued, these two categories morphed into two classifications based on the proverb, “give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” The two categories were “Just Fish” and “Teach to Fish.”

**Just Fish** Course descriptions that fall into the “Just Fish” category placed importance upon learning about and creating documents or genres. (The distinction is unclear given the brevity of the course description: without knowing how the professor taught the course, they may or may not have imparted the idea of how a genre is a specific answer to a rhetorical situation, and, instead, only asked the student to create a document). These course descriptions almost always include a list of specific workplace genres and action-based words focused on how the students would enact their new knowledge to create these texts: “practice,” “composing,” or “preparing.” The “Just Fish” category often includes “focus on” or “emphasis on” the workplace documents they list. A sample of a “Just Fish” course description is included in Figure 1.

Figure 1  
The “Just Fish” Model

Fish Model Category	Coding Criteria	Course Description Example
Just Fish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• a list of specific workplace genres</li> <li>• action-based words focused on how the students will enact their new knowledge to create these texts: “practice,” “composing,” or “preparing.”</li> <li>• The “Just Fish” category often includes “focus on” or “emphasis on” the workplace documents they list.</li> </ul>	An introduction to the variety and forms of workplace discourse. Emphasis on composing documents such as memos, letters, resumes and reports.

This group of descriptions focuses less on skills that the student will learn and more on what genres they will be able to create, as evidenced by verbs focusing exclusively on composition and a list of genres. The focus isn’t on the action of “fishing” or the elements that go into those “fish”; it’s on the fish themselves. There is little-to-no explanation of how the student will learn about these genres, just that they will create them. Overall, these courses emphasize documents and genres that result from the writing process and the elements said process is comprised of.

**Teach to Fish** These course descriptions focused on the process of and strategies for creating. This included looking beyond the document to who is reading it (audience

awareness) and writing for specific situations by recognizing and responding to the given rhetorical situation. There is a sense of teaching metacognition: the writer should be aware of what they are doing and why in the text. This cognizance includes an attention to audience, purpose, and style, but above all, these courses include applying knowledge of conventions, leading to a clear purpose, sense of audience awareness, and writer’s position. The “teach to fish” category advocates for writers to understand writing and then apply that knowledge to business documents. A sample of a “Teach to Fish” course description is included in Figure 2.

The “Teaching to Fish” group focuses more on the skills that the student will

Figure 2  
The “Teaching to Fish” Model

Fish Model Category	Coding Criteria	Course Description Example
Teaching to Fish	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on the process and strategies for creating workplace documents.</li> <li>• Mentions audience awareness, writing purpose, or writing for specific situations.</li> <li>• Suggests student should take conventions and apply them to business documents.</li> </ul>	Job related writing skills for use in career communications. Includes writing for audiences and situations, applying business writing and organization conventions, completing job-related forms at the beginning and intermediate levels, and writing resumes.

take away from the course. More than just being able to create specific documents, students now have a window into what elements of writing they will learn about. In the example above, students should expect to study writing for audiences, writing for situations, and applying writing conventions to their own documents. While the Just Fish group lures in (pun definitely intended) students with what they'll take away from the course (a complete resume, knowing how to plop bits of information into the right spots in a memo), the Teaching to Fish group establishes the skills the students will learn and must apply to writing in this course. However, these skills are often described in such a way as to be confined to that specific class and the documents discussed. We see this in the description above: there is no clear communication of how the student might take the skills they learn in this class to other forms of writing in the future. All of the skills that the course description markets seem to service "completing job-related forms at the beginning and intermediate levels, and writing resumes." The larger, beyond-the-course benefits are missing.

Further analysis for each of the classifications of what students gained from the course, especially descriptions that fell into the "Teaching to Fish" category, indicated that there was a third category.

**The "Scale Model"** The name "Scale Model," while a nod to the "Fish Categories" title, actually speaks to the ability to judge something. Like applying a grading scale to a paper, these courses are dedicated to helping students determine the elements of a piece of writing, judge what parts do or do not work, and implement this knowledge within their own texts. And, like a grading rubric, students should be able to

judge multiple pieces of writing; after learning how to use the scale, the student should be able to use their ability to judge writing based on one specific scale and apply it to other pieces of writing, or use what they've learned as a model across genres. This category focused on course descriptions that emphasized analysis and application. This could be students analyzing a genre to see how they lead to certain business documents and certain conventions, or analysis that allows the writer to develop appropriate content and manipulate organization and style effectively. The goal in these courses, as conveyed in the course description, was for writers to take existing genres, recognize the conventions of those genres, and then utilize those conventions to create their own documents. These courses advocated for analysis on how people typically read and use workplace documents through the purposes, structure, requirements, and language of professional writing. The Scale Model group of course descriptions are defined by their focus on assessing documents and analyzing the issues and details important to the communication to be produce effective workplace genres. While all Scale Model courses are Teaching to Fish courses, not all Teaching to Fish courses are Scale Model courses. A sample of a Scale Model course description is included in Figure 3 (p. 36).

The Scale Model group takes the "Teaching to Fish" course description a step further by indicating how skills such as analysis can be applicable in multi-genre, multi-situational ways. Instead of just teaching skills that will be useful in the class or when encountering one type of writing, teaching students how to conduct a rhetorical analysis means they can use their knowledge outside the classroom and

beyond the course and one type of document. Here, there isn't just a focus on "fish" or explaining how the student will learn to fish. Instead, these courses push farther, attempting to showing students how "learning to fish" can also give you the tools to "learn to kayak."

Figure 3  
The Scale Model

Fish Model Category	Coding Criteria	Course Description Example
The Scale Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Emphasizes analysis, whether it be genre analysis or rhetorical analysis. This analysis focuses on assessing documents and identifying the issues and details important to the communication.</li> <li>Indicates that skills learned within the course are applicable outside of the course.</li> </ul>	This course presents students opportunities to learn how to design and present effective professional documents. The course emphasizes a rhetorical approach to analyzing the issues and details important to the communication to be produced (e.g., audience, style, format, purpose). Students will encounter topics such as, but not limited to, abstracts, email, instructions, letters, memoranda, proposals, and various types of reports.

After determining what language, keywords, and trends defined the three categories I had noticed (as described in the charts above), I formulated set criteria for each distinction and recoded the course descriptions based on the three sets of criteria. This was my final coding pass.

### Results and Discussion

Analyzing course descriptions both as snapshots into classes and as marketing tools, it became apparent that there was a lack of consistency in MMPW courses. Different courses appear to focus on different outcomes and, based on pedagogical focuses, different professors seem to place value on teaching a variety of things.

#### *Lack of Consistency in What the Course Promises*

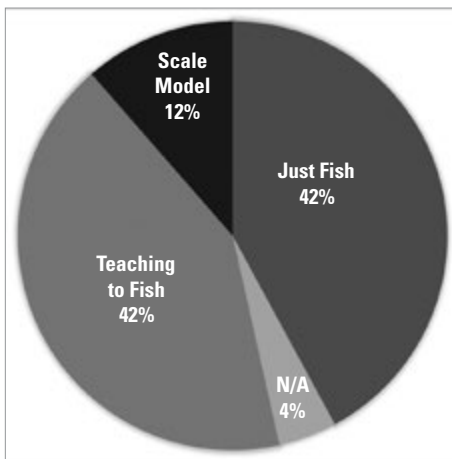
While these course descriptions obviously don't convey the complexity of an entire classroom experience, I believe it's interesting

and important to analyze what these course descriptions convey to students about the course. The Fish categories indicate that there isn't a universal understanding across academia for what the MMPW teaches or what these courses promise to students. In analyzing the three different types of course descriptions, I noticed that programs and course description authors are pushing three frameworks that focus on very different things that the student will gain by taking the class. By looking at the Fish categories, we see that three different types of marketed classroom experiences are emerging: courses where students focus on learning genres, courses where students learn skills for the class, and courses where students learn how to analyze and apply knowledge to documents within and beyond the scope of the course.

However, there isn't one type of course description that reigns supreme. The "Just Fish" and "Teaching to Fish" categories

were represented equally in the data I studied, with both having 42 percent of the total course descriptions. The “Scale Model” group only had 12 percent of the total (see Figure 4). The prevalence of certain types of course descriptions suggests that there isn’t a standardized goal for what students should experience across MMPW courses, and that what is marketed to students in these courses varies.

Figure 4  
**Course description types according to their Fish classification**



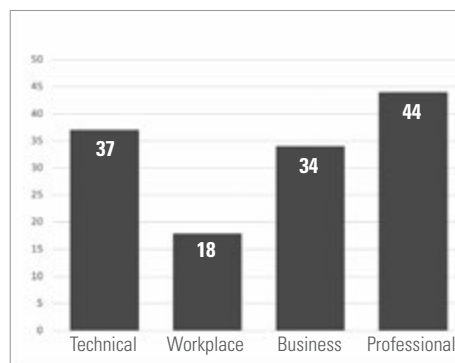
Ultimately, I think this lack of consistency speaks to the relationship between students and professional writing courses. If students are attempting to increase their marketability by participating in these courses, the three categories indicate different perceptions of what is marketable: business and workplace documents, writing skills for creating business and workplace documents, or analysis that can be applied to a variety of genres and situations.

### ***Lack of Consistency in Course Nomenclature***

I also coded the 114 course descriptions for four different descriptors (“technical,” “workplace,” “business,” and “professional”) to label the writing done within the course. Any courses that used more than one word to describe the type of writing were marked in all applicable categories. Any courses that lacked these descriptive words or didn’t contain any description (the information wasn’t available or wasn’t provided by the respondent) were not coded.

There was no clear consensus on what type of writing students were doing or how that writing was described in the course description. The variety of names seems to speak to a lack of agreement about the differences between business writing, technical writing, professional writing, and workplace writing (see Figure 5). Certain genres were universally mentioned in these course descriptions, despite the various titles and distinctions.

Figure 5  
**Descriptors for Writing in Course Descriptions: Course Nomenclature**



### ***Lack of Consistency in Pedagogy and Differences between Fish Categories and Pedagogies***

In addition to sharing course descriptions, Read and Michaud's survey asked professors to select which pedagogies they used while teaching the MMPW. As my research continued, this data became an interesting foil to the course descriptions: if the course description was an insight into what the student could expect to get from a course, the professor's pedagogy was a window into what professors found important and were teaching in these courses. An initial survey question allowed respondents to choose any number of pedagogical options used in their teaching. A follow-up question asked the professors to choose their primary or central pedagogy. Responses totaled 154. The survey options were:

- Teaching communication genres (e.g. memos, letters, reports, etc.)
- Teaching professional development genres (e.g. resumes, cover letters, LinkedIn)
- Connecting students to clients for writing projects (e.g. collaboration with institutional or industry partners)
- Engaging students in service learning projects in the community (e.g. community/non-profit partnerships)
- Teaching students how to do their own research about writing in workplace contexts
- Engaging students in reading scholarly texts (e.g. journal articles, monographs, research reports) and experimenting with scholarly research methods (e.g. ethnography, case study, interviews, etc.)
- Exploring case studies to create contexts for writing assignments.

Figure 6 shows the number of responses characterizing the professor's teaching approaches compared to number of professors who selected a given pedagogy as their central and primary approach to teaching the MMPW.

In looking at the pedagogies teachers use, we also see a lack of consistency. This is to be expected: no professor teaches exactly like another. However, focusing on professors' primary choices, 79 chose teaching communication genres as their primary approach. This is more than all of the rest of the categories combined (75 total).

During my coding process, I selected several specific course descriptions to function as examples to create my finalized coding criteria. After researching the variety in the pedagogies, I decided to compare pedagogy (teacher perception of how to teach students Professional Writing) to the course description (what the student uses to judge what they will learn in a professional writing course) and which Fish category that respective description fell into. Figure 7 (pp. 40–41) tables these results.

In all of the "Just Fish" course description examples I examined, the professor had selected "teaching communication genres" as their primary approach. Of the "Teaching to Fish" group, all but one of the professors chose "teaching communication genres." In the "Scale Model" group three out of the four professors had chosen a central approach that was something other than "teaching communication genres."

Like the course descriptions, the pedagogical approaches of teachers differ in a way that suggests a lack of consistency across institutions. However, as seen in these examples, in classroom environments where the professors are teaching higher order skills to transfer outside of the



**Figure 6**  
**All Pedagogies Used Versus Central Pedagogy Used**

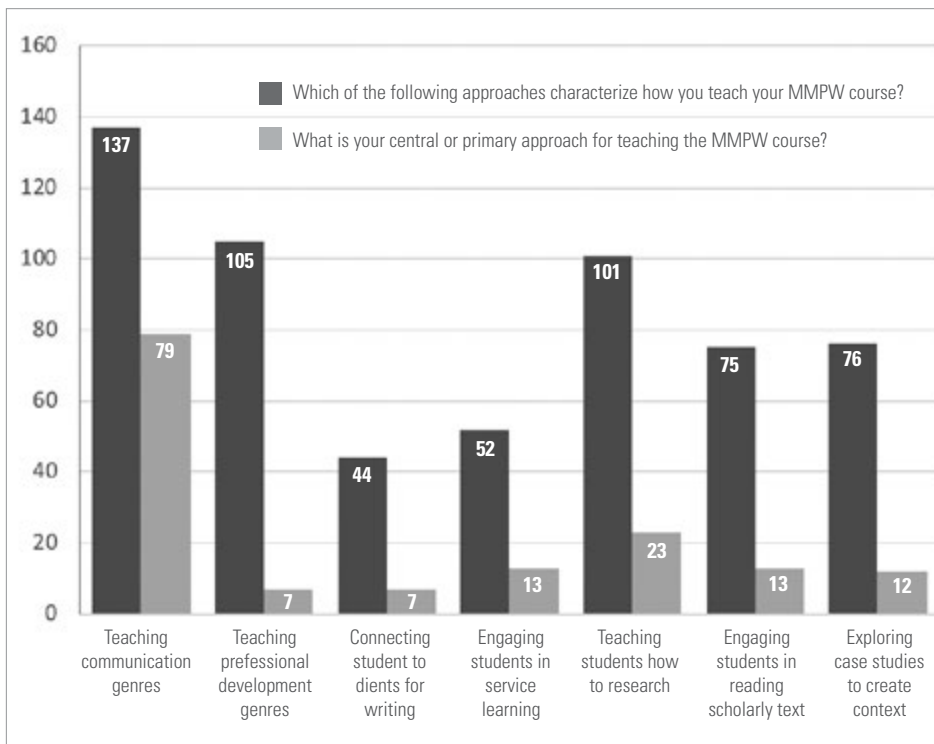


Figure 7

**Sample Course Descriptions Sorted by Model and Primary Pedagogy**

Scale Model	Professor's Primary Pedagogy
Students will learn to analyze the rhetorical context that gives rise to common business genres (e.g., meeting minutes, email requests, executive summaries, internal proposals, etc.). Based on rhetorical analysis, students will be able to develop content and manipulate organization and style.	Exploring case studies to create contexts for writing assignments.
Students learn to recognize and utilize the central conventions of writing in these disciplines by using techniques of rhetorical analysis.	Not completed.
Students learn how people typically read and use workplace documents by analyzing the purposes, structure, requirements, and language of professional writing and by producing documents for professional settings that fulfill a specific purpose for the intended audience.	Connecting students to clients for writing projects (e.g. collaboration with institutional or industry partners).
The course emphasizes a rhetorical approach to analyzing the issues and details important to the communication to be produced (e.g., audience, style, format, purpose).	Connecting students to clients for writing projects (e.g. collaboration with institutional or industry partners).
Teaching to Fish	
Focuses on the processes and strategies for creating written communication within a workplace setting. Examines audience awareness, stylistic conventions, and document design. Emphasizes the preparation of a variety of written documents, such as resumes, internal and external correspondence, descriptions, proposals, instructions, summaries, and reports.	Teaching communication genres.
Job related writing skills for use in career communications. Includes writing for audiences and situations at the beginning and intermediate levels, applying business writing and organization conventions, completing job-related forms at the beginning and intermediate levels, and writing resumes.	Teaching communication genres.
A student in English 303 should expect to create and revise documents in multiple genres. Each document should establish a clear purpose, sense of audience awareness, and sense of the writer's presence and position.	Teaching communication genres.
Effective organization and design of documents common in business life—letters, memos, reports, and resumes. Attention to audience, purpose, and style.	Engaging students in reading scholarly texts and experimenting with scholarly research methods.

Just Fish	
Focus on the types of documents necessary to make decisions and take action on the job, such as proposals, reports, instructions, policies and procedures, e-mail messages, letters, and description of products and services.	Teaching communication genres.
An introduction to the variety and forms of workplace discourse. Emphasis on composing documents such as memos, letters, resumes and reports.	Teaching communication genres.
A study of business and managerial writing; practice in writing letters, memos, and reports, including a report requiring research and documentation.	Teaching communication genres.

classroom, the focus is not on simply teaching students how to create genres. It's interesting to note that even when instructors are teaching "Teaching to Fish" courses that focus on the skills students will be learning, there still seems to be a pedagogical focus on teaching communication genres. Perhaps this is because these course descriptions focused on writing skills that apply to the Professional Writing course alone.

If professors formulate their teaching pedagogies based on what they think the student should know at the end of the class, or even what they believe students should know about professional writing, then it is clear that a majority professors find "teaching communication genres" the most crucial thing for their students to learn.

## Conclusion

By looking at the course descriptions for MMPW courses and the pedagogical focus of the professors teaching these classes, we are able to see two views of the MMPW: one where the course is marketed to students, letting them know what to expect and what they'll take away, and the perspective of the professors teaching the course. Across the board and from both viewpoints, the MMPW course isn't consistent. There isn't a universal set of course

outcomes, a set definition of professional writing that all academics adhere to, or even a main pedagogy that professors of MMPW courses use. The lack of consistency is clear in three major course description types that promise vastly different learning experiences and in the fact that certain institutions have different ideas of what professional writing means.

Ultimately, the lack of consistency across the MMPW seems to speak to a lack of understanding, both of what the MMPW should teach and what students find desirable in these courses. (Analysis? Writing skills? Genres?) Do students only want to know how to create the same genres that have been part of professional writing education for decades? Or should Professional Writing instruction push beyond documents into writing skills and even the art of analysis, which would allow students to recreate any type of document they might encounter in the workplace?

In her 2002 article "Layered Literacies: A Theoretical Framework for Technical Communication," Kelli Cargile Cook outlined six different literacies that she found in most technical writing instruction. Among them, the "Basic Literacy" category aligns almost directly with the "Just Fish" distinction. Cook found that courses fell

into this particular group if “conventions and rules for clear and accurate document design and graphics governed how documents looked and how data was visually represented” (9). Several of Cook’s other literacies seem to touch on the Teaching to Fish and Scale Model courses. She argues that any of the six different types of literacy are not inherently better or worse than their five other counterparts, but when writing instruction focuses on one to the exclusion of the others it keeps students from having all the skills that a modern workplace requires.

Cook’s solution is not to stop teaching “Basic Literacy,” but to layer that literacy with

others, to go beyond the basic literacy and teach rhetorical, social, technological, and ethical literacies in tandem with one another. As Cook says, “By focusing on these literacies rather than on specific workplace skills, technical communication instructors may better prepare students for many workplaces and prepare them for lifelong learning, not learning for a specific vocation” (24). In evaluating the current goals of the MMPW and determining the differences between them, it is clear that there isn’t a singular understanding of what a student completing a Professional Writing course should know or what a Professional Writing professor must teach in modern academia.

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